



FIESTA DES SUDS

MARSEILLE, FRANCE

Ed Stocker immerses himself in local Provençal culture during Marseille's vibrant autumn festival

off proceedings on the main stage. They're showcasing their new *Origines Contrôlées* project – a series of Algerian immigration songs from the 40s to 80s. It's beautiful music – at times wistful, at others wickedly ironic and uplifting – sung in Arabic, Kabyle and French. But it's the local boys Massilia Sound System who really get the fiesta going. Their reggae-influenced music, often in Provençal dialect, still sounds fresh after two decades. The MCs are well into middle age but they look effortlessly cool in jeans, baseball caps and T-shirts. The crowd is young and boisterous. Standing in the middle is like being part of a massive, wriggling centipede, throwing itself left and right in-between beats. The less adventurous, rather wisely, stick to the relatively tranquil flanks.

Musically, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Later that evening, the indoor Salle des Sucres is transformed into an Anatolian knees-up with a triple bill of Istanbul-based bands: Techno Roman Project, Three Women of Istanbul and Baba Zula. The latter features a shimmering bellydancer, driving *darbuka* and the weird and wonderful sounds of the plugged-in *saz*. Saturday evening is equally eclectic with notable performances from the Balkans' Goran Bregović and his dinner jacket-clad Orchestra for Weddings and Burials. Zanzibar's Culture Musical Club are entrancing, too, grinning away whilst playing. Dressed in traditional African dress, it's an otherworldly experience listening to their *taarab* sound so rooted in the Middle East. Sunday sees the docks transformed into a hip-

"You arrive at seven and leave at four in the morning. You're here to eat, drink, see the exhibitions and watch the bulls"

Road music – the main stage underneath a motorway flyover



Top to bottom: Gari & Papet J of Massilia Sound System; the bustling bar; Istanbul's Baba Zula; the old port with Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde in the distance; local *politicien* Saucisse



There's nowhere in France quite like Marseille. It's a captivating place, baked by Mediterranean sunshine and nourished by the fishing boats that chug into the old port at dawn to unload the morning's haul. Founded by Phoenicians in 600BC, the old town is a warren of tightly packed, shuttered houses that snake up to the Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde basilica, keeping watch over the sprawling metropolis. Marseille is a city that has none of the haughtiness of its Côte d'Azur neighbours and remains refreshingly unpretentious. It has a charm fraying round the edges nonetheless: graffiti adorns the side streets, paint peels off the pastel-coloured houses and there's a vibrant edginess that you won't find elsewhere.

Marseille has always looked south for influence and there's a strong distrust

of Paris and its bureaucratic, northern European mentality. In a country where immigrant culture is normally marginalised to the point of obscurity, here it's defiantly on show, representing a diverse diaspora of peoples from Algeria, Italy, Senegal, Libya, Spain, Tunisia, Mali, Ivory Coast, Armenia, Brazil and Morocco among others. Stray off La Canebière, the main shopping street, and you are suddenly in the thick of a West African flea market, or a bustling North African teahouse where elderly Maghreb men sit cross-legged at outdoor tables sipping their *thé à la menthe*.

But it was only in 1992, when Fiesta des Suds was founded, that Marseille had a music festival worthy of its multiracial make-up. Since then, for a couple of weeks in October, the population has moved to a global cocktail of sounds that sweep through

southern Europe and Africa, taking in Asia and the Middle East. Away from the picture postcard images of Le Panier neighbourhood, Fiesta des Suds takes place in the heart of the dockyards. It's a desolate area by night, with cranes poking over the horizon and the glow of cabin lights onboard freight ships bobbing on the nearby sea. And yet it fits in perfectly with the ethos of the festival. "We wanted music that represents all the people who have arrived via the port," notes Florence Chastanier, who founded the event, along with Bernard Aubert. "People who came from all over the Mediterranean, Africa and Latin America. The port is symbolic."

Turning up on the opening Friday night, the site is a wonderful urban space. The highlight has to be the quirky open-air stage situated directly underneath a motorway flyover, hemmed in by massive concrete

columns. There can't be many stages like this in the world and everyone from *chanson* crooners to local rap superstars IAM have played here. "The artists love it," laughs Chastanier. "It's like a cathedral. It's magnificent!" There's also a massive indoor concert hall, complete with mezzanine viewing gallery, several bars, numerous art exhibitions, a mini bullring (they like their bullfights in this part of France) and food stalls covering every corner of the globe. The crowd – around 60,000 during the whole festival – is a healthy mix of ages and races and there doesn't seem any danger, just yet, of Fiesta des Suds being hijacked by the boho bourgeoisie.

The south of France, of course, is heavily represented. Toulouse-based brothers, Mouss and Hakim – members of the popular *rai'n* reggae outfit Zebda – kick

hop battleground with dancers and rappers from France, Holland and La Réunion.

Over the next ten days the festival welcomes everyone from Rabih Abou-Khalil and Seun Kuti to Idir and Wax Tailor. The music begins at seven every evening, pushing through until the early hours. This leaves time to explore the city by day: strolling around the colourful Cours Julien quarter; tucking into a steaming *bouillabaisse* (fish stew) in the old port; taking a boat trip out to the Château d'If (inspiration for *The Count of Monte Cristo*). And there's much more to absorb than just the bands. It's a 'fiesta' for a reason, asserts Chastanier: "You arrive at seven and leave at four in the morning. There are six or seven bands to see and, more importantly, you're in a party environment. You're also here to eat, drink, see the exhibitions and watch the bulls."

With this in mind, we wander the site. The indoor bar is packed with punters and there's a thick fog of smoke and a sharp smell of anise in the air. This is Provence, after all, and they're doing a roaring trade in *pastis* – a clear, aniseed spirit that turns milky white when topped up with water. Later that evening we tuck into a spicy Pakistani curry and meet distinguished local resident Saucisse, who has his own stand. Saucisse recently stood in local mayoral elections and received a worryingly high percentage of votes. Worrying because Saucisse happens to be a sausage dog. Only in Marseille. Only at Fiesta des Suds. ●

Fiesta des Suds, featuring Rokia Traoré and Omara Portuondo among others, runs October 17-31 2008
www.dock-des-suds.org/fiesta2008

